Annette Davison

Viewing practices in relation to contemporary television serial end credit sequences

August 2014

Television viewing behaviours are in part a function of the demands of the text on the viewer, and the viewer’s investment in the text, which may in turn be related to competence or familiarity with the genre. For this reason, when I organised a series of focus groups to explore these behaviours, I did not attempt to elicit participation from a broad demographic sample. Rather, I recruited individuals who self-identified as regular viewers of long-running television serials. A series of four group discussions took place in February 2012 at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Leeds in the UK. There were 21 participants—13 male, and 8 female —comprising 11 students, 6 administrative staff, and 4 academic staff. Participants were invited to talk about their viewing behaviour in response to two stimuli — an extended (c. 90 second) main title sequence, and an end credit sequence — as well as to the contributions of the other participants. I structured discussion around audiovisual stimuli because it offered better opportunities for memory retrieval than other forms of data collection. Aside from asking participants to elaborate on points made during the discussion I let the conversations take their own course and avoided other kinds of intervention. Here I describe the discussions that took place in response to the second

---

1 The majority were in their twenties (13), 4 in their thirties, 2 were in their forties, one in his/her fifties, and one participant preferred not give his/her age. 17 of the 21 participants were British. Group sizes varied from 4 to 6 participants, more or less in line with the typically advised group size of 6 to 8 participants (Bloor et al 2001, p. 26).

2 For more a more detailed exposition of methodological decisions involved in this research, see Davison 2013.
stimuli, for which I used the closing moments of episode three from the fourth season of the *The Sopranos*, starting the clip during the final lines of dialogue.\(^3\) At the end of the conversation between the protagonists a pop song enters suddenly: “Dawn (Go Away)” performed by Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons. The end credits then appear against a black screen.

Several participants made the connection between the dialogue and singer (Tony Soprano refers to Frankie Valli by name in the final lines of dialogue), and noted that *The Sopranos* often offered opportunities to make connections between the chosen song and the preceding episode. One participant said that it reminded her of the episode endings of *Mad Men*, which tends to use older music, but which “bears some resemblance to what’s happened, and sometimes if you don’t know the tune, you have to kind of wait until you hear what the refrain is, or look it up” (10 Feb). Others agreed. Indeed several participants noted that they enjoyed the curated character of the end credits music in *The Sopranos*. They felt the approach reminded them of, or urged them to listen to good music tracks.\(^4\) Furthermore, they used the music selections to enable a moment of reflection on the preceding episode.

Some participants highlighted the use of different types of association between the song/track and the given episode, and suggested that certain serials focus on one kind of association more than others. For example, one participant noted that the choice is often “quite obvious” in *Mad Men*: “usually it was to kind of contrast with what you’ve just seen” (10 Feb). Regular viewers of *The Sopranos* reported occasional use of this approach, where an opposing sensibility is used to “[magnify]

---

\(^3\) See Davison 2013 for a discussion of the responses concerning main title sequences.  
\(^4\) “But I quite often really, like for me, because of the music they pick, that was, as much a part of the programme as the rest of it, the bit of the action with the drama with the actors, which is why I, and also usually ‘cos they’re quite good tunes. They’re quite good to listen to” (participant, 10 Feb).
the awfulness of the [preceding] scene.” One participant stated they had noted an assortment of music-episode correlations in *The Sopranos*, suggesting they listen to the show’s end credit music intently, exploring possible connections to the preceding episode; a view echoed by participants from other groups. Indeed, this variety in end credit music-episode correlations is a distinctive characteristic of the practice in *The Sopranos.*

Branding was mentioned by a number of focus group participants, though not by name: “it adds to, there’s a production value side of it, right, I think. It feels quite expensive. It feels quite luxurious and I think possibly there’s… It gives it a kind of indie cred in some ways.” (23 Feb) It was noted that it also suggested “an American kind of thing as well”, by comparison to British drama. Participants listed a number of subsequent HBO serials that also make use of the practice. It thus not only offers opportunities for interpretive activity on the part of the viewer, but also signals characteristics such as the show’s country of origin, budget and the show’s and/or the channel’s brand. This also affects the status viewers afford the sequence. Indeed, by comparison to the main title sequence, more participants considered the end credits

---

5 As one participant put it: “you’d get a really violent episode and I would have to leave the room, and tell me when it’s finished […] and then there would be, they’d put on some chirpy little ?? after it, and you’d go ‘Oh’. And it’s kind of just magnifying the awfulness of the scene that’s just been on, you know […] It’s almost like you got this hour long view into this world and when [clicks fingers, indicating arrival of the song/track] that’s you. Bye bye” (10 Feb).

6 The chosen track “can be according to the episode’s content or some kind of non-sequitur, or it’s just kind of random I think. It’s always changeable. I don’t think it’s always related to the plot of the preceding episode” (9 Feb). Participants in the other groups echoed this view. For example, the “quite featured use of pre-existing music, some of which has quite an explicit connection to the er theme, and sometimes it feels a bit more… arbitrary … there’s a less obvious thing.” 23 Feb. The former participant also said he would be interested in compiling a “list of the end credit tunes. Did they always… how well the music can fit into the episodes” 9 (Feb).

7 See Davison 2014 for a more detailed examination of this variety in the first season.

8 The same participant stated that the practice of novel end credit music selections suggested HBO to her and went on to wonder if “partly it’s appealing to a particular demographic?” (23 Feb).
sequence part of the show and listened to it in full than was the case with main title sequences, even where the latter were liked and re-viewed frequently. Viewing behaviour was dependent on the particular serial though:

for instance, while I’d always listen to the end of *Mad Men*, I’d almost always listen to the beginning of *Mad Men* as well because I like the music. […] For *Six Feet Under*, I would probably listen to the music at the end, but not the music at the beginning. *The Sopranos*, I’d definitely listen to both. Erm, for something like *Friends* or something that doesn’t have a song at the end, it’s just the theme tune again [makes face] (10 Feb).

Certain types of serial are thus creating an expectation for a different music track to appear as a novel postface for each episode.

Several of the focus group participants also suggested that the music is not always presented to them in a straightforward manner: it comes with “authorial” commentary on the characters, the situation, the narrative arc, or an attempt is made to shock or surprise. One participant highlighted that *The Sopranos* “plays quite a lot with […] perceptions of high art low art” — and went on to qualify this as “not quite the right term, […] but they often seem to, there’s quite often the theme about how other people perceive them as being poor, and Italian, kind of working class immigrants, but actually they’re incredibly rich and powerful, and we, they perceive themselves as very sophisticated, but then [followed by discussion of the Bada Bing club and of its “trashy” nature]. (23 Feb) Music thus offers another means of presenting and experiencing such conflicts. Indeed another participant noted how the
use of Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’” in the show’s final episode sounded “really epic. I mean the song itself is made a lot more epic by the setting, you know. […] a lot less cheesy I guess… in that context.” (9 Feb) The track is ostensibly source music chosen by Tony, which is [SPOILER ALERT] interrupted mid-line: “Don't stop” [CUT to black]. The final text credits follow ten seconds later, in silence. Here the interruption of the song is as significant as the track choice; through six seasons only two episodes of *The Sopranos* play out without a music selection; the other, in season two, features the repetitive electronic sound of hospital equipment as it monitors a character in critical condition.⁹

In summary, for these participants the decision to view (and listen to) a serial’s end credit sequence is dependent on a number of factors, particularly the viewer’s relationship with the serial and how the viewer judges the status of end credit sequences. That is, whether the sequence is considered part of the show or extraneous to it (though the judgement may be different for different serials). Social factors also impact on the viewing situation, so that where serials are watched with others, the viewing of end credit sequences may function as a source of disagreement or negotiation. The mode of delivery and type of viewing also affects whether end credit sequences are watched in full: whether multiple episodes are binge-viewed in a single sitting, for example, a viewing behaviour afforded by DVD box-sets, and recorded, streamed or downloaded content. Other factors include the viewer’s un/familiarity

---

⁹ Chase apparently wanted to exclude all the textual end credits for the final episode, and simply run an empty black screen “all the way until the HBO ‘whoosh’ sound. But the Director’s Guild wouldn’t give us a waiver” (‘Sopranos’ creator defends famous finale’. Associated Press, 23 October 2007. See http://www.today.com/id/21440301#.U2UcE1zlZRw [accessed 3 May 2014]). Though it should be noted that the original track also ends much the same way, though albeit a minute further into the track, and is not cut dead (as on *The Sopranos*): rather the final sounds are highly reverberant and extend the duration of the otherwise abrupt ending.
with the song, the song’s judged musical interest, and the strength of the track’s invitation to interpretative activity, that is, whether the viewer feels a need to interrogate how the track might relate to the preceding episode. Liking the music, recognising the chosen track, and/or finding the choice interesting, offered a reward in itself for some.  

References


10 “And I’ll, I’ll quite often go, Oh, I love that song, I haven’t heard that for years! [laughs]” (10 Feb)